

Bismarck and the Alliance System

I

The Downside of Victory

Victory for Germany in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870/71 made it the strongest military power in Europe. But this made other powers suspicious. Bismarck was aware of the danger; he declared Germany to be a 'satiated' power and sought security for Germany. The main threats were (1) a French war of revenge; (2) being sucked into an Austro-Russian conflict in the Balkans. Bismarck sought to isolate France and mediate between Austria-Hungary and Russia. After 1871 he tried to present Germany to the rest of Europe as peace loving. For example, when in 1871 the Russians and Austrians signed a treaty, the Germans gave their assent. This led to the Three Emperors' Agreement of October 1873, an alliance between the three monarchical powers of central and Eastern Europe, but it was a rather vague document. However, in contrast to this conciliatory approach to diplomacy, in April 1875 Bismarck permitted an article to be published in the *Berlin Post* entitled 'Is War in Sight?' which was directed against France. This was partly a valid response to political developments within France, and his main motive for whipping up a war scare was that parties loyal to the government in Germany would win a forthcoming election. In fact the scare led to Britain and Russia offering the French guarantees. This showed that Germany's dominant position in Europe was actually its chief problem, since the other European powers could be easily drawn into taking sides with France against Germany, which the colonial rivalries between Britain and France, and Britain and Russia would otherwise make a seeming impossibility.

In 1879 Bismarck concluded a Dual Alliance with Austria Hungary. However, this was motivated by a desire to be able to exert pressure on Austria in the event of a crisis in the Balkans. Bismarck commented, "Always try to be one of three in a world of five great powers".

II

Bismarck's Response: the Alliance System

The Near East Crisis, 1875-78

In 1875 there was a rising in Bosnia and Herzegovina against Turkish rule. By 1876 there was also a revolt in Bulgarian, which was still part of the Ottoman Empire. Russian support of pan-Slavism not only threatened Turkey but also the Austro-Hungarian



Copyright © Blacksacademy – January 2003

Empire. Bismarck sought to mediate between Austria and Russia, and to this end sought the co-operation of Britain. He wanted Britain to lead the opposition to Russia. The war in the Balkans was ferocious, with atrocities committed by both sides, especially the probable massacre by the Turks of 10,000 Bulgarians in 1876. Britain was prevented by public opinion from supporting the Turks, and the Russians felt themselves more under pressure to intervene on behalf of the Balkan rebels. However, Austria and Russia kept to the terms of the Three Emperors' Agreement. Russian foreign minister, Gorchakov, realised that Russia could not act unilaterally in the Balkans, and Andrassy, the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, accepted that they could not act without German support, which was not likely to be forthcoming. Germany wanted to avoid taking sides. But no diplomatic solution was found between 1875 and 1877. By spring 1877 Serbs and Montenegrans were facing defeat by the Turks and the likelihood of ferocious reprisals. Public opinion in Russia called on the Tsarist government to perform its 'holy duty'. The Russian government, aware of international relations, hesitated from a declaration of war. Then Serbia was defeated by the Turks. In April 1877 Russia declared war on Turkey. The Turks put up strong resistance at the fortress of Plevna. Britain opinion returned in favour of the Turks. By January 1878 the Russians were advancing towards Constantinople and the Turks sued for peace. The Treaty of San Stephano of March 1878 created Greater Bulgaria, which would be occupied by Russia for two years. It ceded territory to Russia and reduced European Turkey to a few fragmented territories. Austria and Britain reacted hostilely. Britain withdrew troops from India and sent its fleet into Turkish waters. Russia accepted that the treaty would be revised at the Congress of Berlin 1878.

The Congress of Berlin

Many agreements were reached before the Congress opened: (1) Russia accepted the reduction of Greater Bulgaria; (2) Turkey agreed to reform and ceded Cyprus to Britain in return for guarantees of her Asian borders; (3) Britain supported Austria-Hungary's claim to Bosnia. The Congress divided Bulgaria into three: (1) the northern part, which was self-governing, except that it was subject to Russian supervision; (2) Eastern Rumelia, which would be self governing but under Turkish suzerainty; (3) Macedonia was handed back to Turkey. Russia acquired Bessarabia. This had been ceded to Rumania after the Crimean War in 1856. Russia also gained Batum from Turkey, which was a port on the eastern side of the Black Sea. The Turks did not wish to lose Cyprus or Bosnia, but were forced to accept the treaty. It was accepted that the fate of Turkey could not be settled by any one power unilaterally. However, the treaty left problems: (1) Bulgaria was still divided; (2) The Turkish continued to misrule Macedonia; (3) The Austrians were forced to impose military rule on Bosnia. They formally annexed Bosnia in 1908. The Berlin Congress did not solve the major problems it addressed, though Bismarck was not responsible for this failure. He advocated outright partition of the



Ottoman Empire. Further, Germany was criticised by Austria & Russia for failing to get them better deals. But Britain did well out of the Treaty, with Cyprus as a base from which to oppose Russian expansion in Asia. The upshot of the Congress of Berlin was that even where Germany sought to act as impartial peacemaker in Europe, there was a tendency for European powers to blame Germany when they deemed themselves to be dissatisfied.

The Alliance System, 1879-84

After 1875 Bismarck adopted a more active diplomacy. His aim was to curb Russian aggression & prevent an international alliance against Germany. The Tsar blamed Germany and Bismarck for organising a European coalition against Russia at the conference. Bismarck did not want to ally with Russia and become dependent on her. Instead he approached the Austrians in 1879; his proposal for a 'Germanic bloc' in central Europe was rejected but a defensive pact solely against Russia was agreed. The Dual Alliance was signed in October 1879. It was a secret treaty. However, Russia got wind of it, and negotiations on a tripartite alliance between Germany, Austria and Russia in June 1881. The Austrians opposed this until a change in British policy towards Turkey made her realise that cooperation with Russia was necessary. The Tripartite Agreement (Dreikaiserbund, ratified 1883) required one power in the alliance to remain neutral if the other two were at war. Germany benefited by being secured against a Franco-Russian alliance. It also gained the goodwill of Alexander III, the new Tsar. Austria and Germany also signed a Triple Alliance with Italy in May 1882. Germany and Italy would support the other if either was attacked by France. In 1881 and 1883 respectively Austria concluded treaties with Serbia and Rumania. In 1884 the Dreikaiserbund was renewed.

Colonial Expansion, 1884-90

In 1884-85 Bismarck became interested in colonial expansion, partly as a response to industrialists' desires for new colonies. However, the colonies proved to be a financial burden, and the need to quell native uprisings caused by mismanagement caused Bismarck to become sick of colonialisation quite rapidly. The colonial policy of 1884-85 was anti-British in intent; it was designed to improve Franco-German relations. Territories in Africa - Togo, the Camaroons, South West Africa - were acquired. The British felt under pressure when Russia threatened Afghanistan in 1885 and a settlement favourable to Germany in East Africa was concluded in 1886. However, by 1890 Germany was more anxious to secure British goodwill and in the second partition of East Africa the Germans made significant concessions to Britain. The German historian Wehler has argued that Bismarck's imperialism was a deliberate attempt to divert attention away from social problems within Germany.



The Alliance System under Pressure, 1885-90

In 1885 there was a revolt in Eastern Rumelia. In the early 1880s the Bulgarians had expelled the Russians, and in 1885 they accepted Eastern Rumelia's call for unification with Bulgaria, in contravention of the Treaty of Berlin. Germany, Austria and Russia all opposed the revolt; but Britain did a volte face and supported an enlarged Bulgaria as a counter-balance to Russia. France and Italy supported Britain. The Tsar, however, forced the Bulgarian prince to abdicate and threatened invasion, which Austria opposed. Bismarck was afraid of a Russo-French alliance and in 1887 proposed a secret alliance with Russia. This was the Reinsurance Treaty. Russia became dominant in Bulgaria. Further tension over the Balkans continued throughout the autumn of 1887, and there was the possibility of a war between Austria and Russia. However, the British and Italians decided to support Austria and Bismarck encouraged them to do so. This resulted in the Second Mediterranean Agreement in December 1887, which agreed to the deployment of the British navy and Austrian ground forces with Italian backing to resist Russian influence in Bulgaria. However, the Reinsurance Treaty did not really improve Russo-German relations. At the end of 1887 Germany refused Russia access to her money markets and Russia borrowed money from France instead in order to finance her industrialisation. In 1888 the new Kaiser, Wilhelm II acceded. He was anti-Russian, as were many influential Germans. Russia's industrialisation was seen as threatening to Germany. Bismarck sought an alliance with Britain in 1889. The Kaiser refused to renew the Reinsurance Treaty in 1890, which was one of the reasons why Bismarck resigned.

III

An Assessment of Bismarck's Foreign Policy

The short term success of his policy was considerable. Germany was secure and there was peace in Europe for 20 years. But by 1890 the system of secret alliances was played out and this raises the question of whether it was the right policy in the first place. Some historians believe that Bismarck's fears were exaggerated - claiming he over-estimated the mood of revenge in France and the strength of pan-Slavism in Russia. On the one hand most Republican leaders in France were realistic enough to appreciate that France could not hope to reverse the verdict of 1871 single-handed but on the other hand, German occupation of Alsace-Lorraine meant that rapprochement with France was never possible and French economy and political recovery carried with it a threat of a war of revenge. Thus, Bismarck was rational in seeking to isolate France, and successful in this policy up to 1890. Since France could never be an ally, and a pre-emptive war was not possible, Germany had to isolate France and this required Germany to have the good will



of Russia, which was always threatened by conflict between Austria and Russia in the Balkans. A.J.P. Taylor regards the Reinsurance Treaty as a desperate 'expedient for postponing war on two fronts.' The Reinsurance Treaty did not lay the basis of a better understanding with Russia. Bismarck sought to prevent or postpone war, but the mood in Germany turned away from 'morbid peace' in favour of 'healthy war'. Thus, when Bismarck fell, the Reinsurance Treaty was not renewed.

